

IN 2ND YEAR, CHARTER SCHOOLS EXPERIMENT TAKES OFF

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Body

Starting a charter school in Michigan last year meant working under legislation that hadn't been fully enacted, without money and with the threat of a monster lawsuit.

Not surprisingly, not many of the independently run public schools were launched. And those that were had a harrowing first year.

That situation appears to be changing rapidly as the 1995-96 school year gets under way.

State Department of Education officials report at least 31 charter schools, with more than 3,500 students, are up and running. Last year, only 528 students were enrolled in eight charter schools. The state has more than 1.6 million schoolchildren.

At least 21 of the newly chartered schools have been approved for state aid averaging more than \$5,000 per student, said Gary Cass, the department's supervisor of public school academies. The rest are awaiting final authorization, he said.

Central Michigan University, which has authorized charters at 25 of the operating schools, is in the process of sanctioning another two dozen.

Charter schools can be organized by anyone -- teachers, parents, business people. Organizers must receive charters, or contracts, from public school districts, community colleges or public universities.

Robert Mills, director of the charter program at CMU, said Tuesday the second-year response is "beyond our greatest expectations. We're on the verge of greatness."

Mills predicted that eventually as much as 10 percent of the school-age population in Michigan could be enrolled in charter schools. In theory, those students will benefit from more choices and greater innovation without having to bear the expense of private school.

Like many of the concept's supporters, Mills also believes charter schools will prompt existing public schools to be more responsive to parents and students.

Carmen N'Namdi, whose formerly private elementary school is operating under a charter this year, said hers has always been a school driven by the needs of parents and students.

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Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse of Detroit is a place where kids "can learn to live lives of real quality," she said.

Operating under a public school charter makes it possible for more families to afford that experience, she said.

"I think anyone who wants to try to take a shot at making life better in the space where they live should try to do it," N'Namdi said.

Others are sure to criticize Nataki Talibah, as one of several charter schools founded by operators of formerly private schools, for what they believe is an exploitation of public funds.

Dorothy Beardmore, a Republican member of the state Board of Education, said the rapid expansion of charter schools is a risk for the schools, the kids and the state.

"I think we should have learned how to crawl before we started to walk and run," she said.

"This whole thing is based on rhetoric without foundation in fact. In other states where they've been tried there is no indication charter schools increase learning."

Beardmore is at odds with the Republican majorities on the state board, in the Legislature and, especially, with Republican Gov. John Engler.

Engler has been one of the nation's most aggressive advocates of education reform based on more school choice, and has pushed for state funding and support of charter schools.

Last year's charter school development was slowed by legislative and legal challenges that tied up funding in state courts. The funding issue hasn't been fully resolved, but the schools that have been authorized so far this year have been virtually guaranteed funding.

The movement also is benefiting this year from activation of a charter school clearinghouse at the Michigan Partnership for New Education, based at Michigan State University.

The partnership has two staff members working full-time to assist new schools and has created a revolving loan fund to provide start-up money before the disbursement of state aid.

Graphic

Photo CRAIG PORTER, Detroit Free Press;

First grader Raymond Parks, 5, learns about the math concepts of more, fewer, and same at Nataki Talibah Schoolhouse of Detroit. Formerly a private school, Nataki Talibah has gone public under the state's charter school program.

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